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After working with adolescent, Negro girls from 12 to 20 years of age, one social worker made several observations on the general characteristics of these girls. About 60 per cent of the girls are in perpetual movement and their attention span is very short. Many of the girls have very indirect and limited communication with people who are not among their close associates. Conflicts between the girls and their families are often so intense that caseworkers find it difficult to get to know the families through the girls or to arrange a meeting with the mother. Most homes are fatherless.

Several steps are followed by a caseworker as she tries to contact and help girls in need. After first reaching the girl, it is best for the social worker to tell her the truth and let her know that she is there to help her. The next step is to have the girls talk subjectively about themselves and their complaints against different adults, teachers, and members of family. It is then possible to plan wholesome activities - social, cultural, and spiritual - to inform the girls of what is really happening outside of their immediate neighborhood.

There are several changes which can be noticed in the girls after working with the social worker for several years. They are able to talk about each other, in the group and outside, without fighting. They have made a change in their ability to postpone satisfactions and to tolerate frustration. A new concept of time, how to spend time wisely and to plan time schedules, is also a worthwhile change observed.

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REACHING GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Reaching Girls and Their Families

by Marcia Allen
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For the past four and a half years I've been working on the streets with groups of adolescent girls, giving a direct service to them and their families. These groups come to me by referral or by direct contact. The referrals might come from the Police Department, the schools, private citizens, or recreation workers. I have a very specific area of the city in which I work. I observe my area: the delicatessens, bowling alleys, social dances, shopping centers--for girls that might be hanging around and disturbing people or molesting the merchants in the area. These are the ways I come in direct contact with the girls. At the very beginning it was more or less observation on my part. As the years go on, I find that I get quite a few referrals and I don't have to do too much looking; the community is becoming so aware of the problems of adolescents that I do not have to look for the groups. I get calls at the office and I go directly to the problem.

What do I do after I make contact with the girls? The very first thing I do with these girls is to tell them why I'm there and how I got to know what they were doing. In other words, give them the truth and let them know I've come to help them find something more wholesome to do--involvement in activities that would keep them from getting into trouble or continuing destructive type of behavior. So what I do is listen to them,

to their story, and why they are doing this sort of thing, and sit down with them and plan some sort of activity. When these girls are so hostile that they cannot be taken into a facility provided by Public Recreation, which is our Recreation Center, then it becomes my duty to work with these girls where they are. In most cases, we move from the shopping center or wherever they might be, into their homes, to their basements, or to the public park--anywhere we can go and sit down and talk without too much interference from outsiders.

You probably know that most of these girls have very few ideas about what they want to do, so it becomes my duty to help them decide or just to start taking them around to different parts of the city and letting them see what the other part of the world is doing, to give them some ideas about what they probably might like to do.

In the very beginning, after the first contact we usually just sit around and I listen to their gripes and complaints about different adults, about their teachers, about themselves, and there is very little relationship or very little conversation between us. Most of their conversation is among themselves. They talk, whisper to each other. Some of them don't say anything until they finally get confidence that maybe this old gal is here "to help us do something." After a few weeks or months of just sitting around or just traveling about the city, we sort of begin to decide something specific as far as activities are concerned .

With the conversations that have been going on, I get the idea of what they are looking for and some of their ideas about or relationships with boys. This gives me an idea that there might be a need for some sort of a workshop or group discussion on personal hygiene or choosing friends and this sort of thing. Well, they don't do too much talking at this type of project but it's the after-conversations that help out, where I really find out that it does help to have this sort of thing.

In the activities that we have attended--I try to give them a variety of activities, social, cultural, and spiritual--I try to give them some idea of what's really happening in the world.

I don't want to spend too much time on what we do because I think some of you have some ideas about what the girls need, especially teenage girls, so let me give you some idea about what these girls are like.

Their age range--the ones that I work with--is from 12 to 20. They are all Negroes, as I am. About 60 per cent of these girls are in perpetual movement. They are just like little children. They can't sit still, their attention span is very short, so consequenty we're moving most of the time from one playground to another or one section of the city to another and this goes on until they begin to settle down and become interested in something. There's still this perpetual movement even at activities where you have to sit, but gradually they begin to

develop a longer attention span. They can restrain themselves or they can sit still for a period of time.

There also is a lot of conflict between these girls and their families, and at first it's very difficult for me to get to know their families. It takes quite a long time because of the fact that the girls are very ashamed of their home situation. In talking with the girls, I try to get to know if there is a mother, a father, and if there is, "when can we go to your house?" Well, it doesn't come right away. It usually comes when the girl is in distress or when she's in trouble at school and she needs someone to bail her out. So this is one of the tools I use to get to know the family. It has happened with most of the girls with whom I work that usually they want me to to go talk with their mother because they cut school one day and they are afraid of getting a beating--not so much anything else. "I'm afraid my mother is going to beat me so you come home and help me out of this jam." With this, I do get to go and meet the parents. This first contact with the parents helps to build up future appointments with the family. In most of the homes, as you know, there are no fathers. About three percent of these girls are prostitutes. When I say prostitutes, their mothers even send them out to get money, and if they don't bring the money back home the mother wants to know why they didnt bring it back home.

Another thing I have noticed with these girls--their communication is very indirect in the beginning. It might be a

silent type of communication; it might be they are talking to me through each other. They might call each other names like "you no-good bitch" and right away it gives me the feeling that they are talking about me because of the nature of the conversation. And they're saying sometimes, why are you meddling with us, we don't need you. But from the fact that I have accepted the tone of voice or this type of language, they seem to feel that I am sort of with them and not so much the bitch they think I am.

At this point maybe I could give you some of the changes that I have seen in the girls with whom I have worked over four and a half years. I have noticed that there is a little less stealing; that they are beginning to face reality. Let me give you an example of this: They can criticize their parents, and this is something they couldn't do in the beginning. They sort of kept the things that happened in their families as a big secret. They didn't want me to know that their mothers were prostitutes or their fathers were alcoholic, but after a period of working with them they began to talk about their parents and not feel too bad about it because they are beginning to face up to it--my mother is an alcoholic or my father is an alcoholic and I want you to help me get out of this situation. This to me denotes growth.

They can talk about each other, in the group and outside the group, without fighting. In the beginning they fought. They used to fight over the other's boy friend. Two girls would

go with the same boy; they used to fight about it, but I've noticed there's less fighting among the friends over the boys.

Another thing that I have learned--these girls have made a change in their ability to postpone satisfactions. They can tolerate some frustration. Whereas earlier, they couldn't sit still in the different meetings we would go to, they now have gotten to the place where they have begun to observe the world about them and what other people are doing and they are trying to sit still. They are trying to say--I shouldn't have children until I get married. But there are other things involved--how do I protect myself? So they are looking for this protection or they are looking for some way to say this is something I don't do until I get married. I don't have children until I get married. They are facing this--that if I do have children there are certain things I can't do.

I also noticed at first with these girls that time means nothing to them or their families. They do not eat together, they don't go to church together, time means nothing to them. When I realized this, I found that I had to be very specific with time. I had to set time when we did certain things and I had to be there on time if I expected them to be on time. This is something that we do with the group that I work with now. If we plan an activity-for instance, we are going to spend two hours together--then they know that we're going to the gymnasium at 7:30. We will stay in the gymnasium until 8:30. From 8:30

until 9 o'clock is the time they can socialize with the boys, and they immediately look at the clock--I mean they stay on this schedule. They know that they can talk to their boy friends from 8:30 to 9, then from 9 to 9:30 is another time that we go back to the old hangout spot. They seem to like to finish up their night with a visit to the old hangout spot. The fact that they are welcome there is what makes me feel good because they were run out from this place but now they can go back and they feel good that they can go back to the old hangout--to the drugstore to buy cigarettes and candy or something and they aren't kicked out. So they are growing and time to them is important. Even the parents are beginning to see that the girls are trying to put themselves on some sort of time.

The girls, as I work with them over a period of months and then years, find it is very difficult to terminate their relations with the group. With one group I've worked with there's something--you know I can't put my finger on it--but I get the feeling that this girl is beginning to get to the place where she can select friends outside this little group. It's difficult for her and it's uncomfortable to her to leave the group, yet she's getting to the position where she can select. She takes it out on me and she takes it out on the girls in the group. They will even spite each other. One girl will decide she's leaving the group and another girl will say no, you're not going, and they'll even fight about it, but it's over the next day. In other words, it's sort of, "I like you, I hate to leave,

but I've got to go."

Usually, they don't really find it comfortable and they come back for the support of the group so when I find that they are ready to leave the group I try to support them outside the group by individual counseling and going out, just the two of us, letting the girl talk about herself and talk about people that she's going to come into contact with. Also I go with her to her school, talk with her counselor there, help her to select her subjects. This helps her to get a good picture of what she is, that she is an individual herself, that she's getting to the place now where she must remember that the mother can't help her next year--she's going to high school and it's time for her to start thinking about what she's going to do. This is very difficult for them to do because they are dependent and their parents are dependent too. Their parents depend upon them to take care of the children, to do the housework, even though the mother is there and is not working. It's dependency, dependency. It's from one dependency to another so it's very difficult for the girl to see herself as an individual. With the help and support that I give them, they can get some sort of image of themselves in this world, as an individual.

Getting these girls ready for jobs entails a lot of time and counseling. Many of the girls I work with are girls who dropped out of school because of pregnancies or they are over 16 and they didn't go back to school. So what I do with these girls is to sit down with them, talk with them about types of jobs, about

the things that are expected of them, that when they are grown persons they have to work in this society, they have to make a place for themselves so they must get a job. With these girls I have to go down to the employment office, help them fill out their application blanks and usually sit with them while they are taking their battery of tests, and then take them home. It's the kind of support that they need and the confidence that someone is with them when they are trying to get jobs.

What is an appropriate work load for this kind of work? I have tried three different approaches on that.

When I first became a street worker there were many referrals coming to me. Being the type of person I am, I tried to work with each referral. My first attempt was trying to plan some activities with each group and each individual, with more concentrated work with one specific group. I found out that I was spreading my efforts too thin. I was not spending my time wisely or placing my efforts where they were most needed. I became confused and frustrated, so I tried another plan.

In this plan, I tried working with two groups located in different sections of my area. This plan seemed more satisfying to the girls in the group and it also gave me more time to do other duties. I had more time to see the girls individually. One group consisted of five girls and the other seven. When the girls began to discuss problems about themselves and their families I became overwhelmed with things to do to help them. Again I began to feel that I was not spending my time wisely,

because these families had so many problems.

After having some sessions with my psychological consultant, I thought of another plan. This plan consisted of working with only one group, and trying to obtain help from other agencies to work with these girls and their families. I had more time to see the girls individually. Each seemed more relaxed and more willing to talk about the problems she had to face. But this way of working with the groups made me most uncomfortable. I seemed to become more involved than I really wanted to be.

The third plan I used with groups was somewhat less taxing and gave me more time to do my other duties. I worked with only one group plus the individuals who had left other groups that I had worked with previously. Based on past experiences and professional group work training I found this plan less confusing. But it seemed I had too much time and I began to feel guilty for neglecting other groups. So I returned to following the second plan that I have described to you.

At the present time I am carrying a work load of two groups. One is a group of seven girls, aged 10 to 12 years. The second is a group of five girls aged 15 to 18 years. Meeting with each group once a week, individual counseling sessions with these girls and their families, plus other girls I've worked with in the past, in addition to trips and outings with the girls, meetings with other agencies, record keeping, etc. leads to a work load of more than forty hours a week. This does not include the occasional crisis that may keep me in the street until two or

three o'clock in the morning.

Of these three plans, I can only say what is appropriate for me. My opinion is that every street worker has to decide how much she is able to handle. With the exception of the third plan, I experimented with each plan for more than two years. The third plan I used only five months.

What have I learned from my street work experience, my group work training and my years of service?

I have learned that adolescent girls from improverished, disrupted families are very difficult to help. But the girls do want to change and they will turn to adults for help.

I think we need to plan services that will reach troubled girls before they have begun shoplifting, street fighting and having illegitimate babies.

I have already begun working with a group of girls under age 12, referred to us by an elementary school principal.

In working with the teenagers we need a kind of programing that will involve their whole families. The parents of my girls are desperate for help and guidance with their child rearing and home management problems.

I also think that we can do more in our schools and playgrounds to encourage individual women, classroom teachers and playground directors, to help some of these troubled girls on a one to one basis.